

# Streamlining Interagency Collaboration for Youth at Risk

*To meet the complex needs of today's students, schools and community agencies need a thoughtful approach for pooling their efforts as well as an awareness of the pitfalls to avoid.*

GRACE PUNG GUTHRIE AND LARRY F. GUTHRIE

Schools are in a bind. They're often expected to meet the complex social and emotional needs of today's diverse student populations, not just their academic needs. A wide assortment of social service agencies has been organized to serve children and youth at risk; but the services often overlap, agencies are compartmentalized, and children are incorrectly referred (Fantini and Sinclair 1985, Heath and McLaughlin 1989, Hodgkinson 1989, Kirst and McLaughlin 1989, Melville and Blank 1991, Schorr 1989). As Hodgkinson (1989) points out, the "bewildering array" of agencies has become part of a large, unwieldy bureaucracy where the emphasis is on self-preservation. Because the types of services and eligibility requirements are determined by sets of complex rules and regulations, critical needs go unmet, and those families least able to navigate their way through the maze of requirements are left out.

Now is the time to look at the full range of functions that schools are being asked to perform and identify which of those the school is best suited to handle, which can best be provided by other institutions and agencies, and which can best be accomplished by joint efforts. The challenge is not simply to divide up responsibilities, but to reconceptualize the role of the school and relationships among the school, the community, and

the larger society. The new arrangement must be designed so that it shifts the emphasis of each agency away from itself and toward the client: the child.

We hope to stimulate and challenge people on the front line of youth education and services to expand their thinking and devise better and more efficient ways to suit their specific local talents and conditions. Already, the experiences of those struggling to provide better integrated services to youth at risk have convinced us that alternatives are available. Here we summarize emerging principles for interagency collaboration. Next, we outline steps a school or other agency might take toward developing an improvement plan. Finally, we point out four pitfalls that social service and educational administrators should avoid, to save time, energy, and funds.<sup>1</sup>

But, first, let's take a brief look at how some communities across the country are trying to encourage interagency cooperation.

## Pilot Efforts at Collaboration

Social service personnel, legislators, and educators are coming to realize that the current set of compartmentalized programs are an affront and an injustice to our children. Nationwide, communities are exploring ways to encourage collaboration among agencies and better integrate services. Pilot collaborative

projects like the New Futures Initiatives (Dayton, Little Rock, Pittsburgh, and Savannah), New Beginnings in San Diego, and California's countywide efforts in Ventura and San Bernardino Counties reflect this trend. Interagency networks and conferences have also been organized to showcase pilot programs, encourage the sharing of ideas, and persuade agency representatives to join together. New legislation offers incentives and seed money for collaboration.

As we monitor the progress of the pilot efforts, we must bear in mind that a better working relationship among agencies is a means, not an end in itself. What we need is improved services for children, and that—rather than the degree of effort, the level of cooperation between organizations—is what we need to hold agencies accountable for.

As these pioneer efforts unfold, every community can and must begin to create its own interagency collaboration. Just as all politics are local, so will improved services for children develop in the contexts of particular communities, schools, and service agencies. The strategy that helps collaboration in one community may not apply in the next; and the set of agencies involved, or how they connect with schools, may differ from community to community.

Even without "proven models" of interagency collaboration, however, recent experience can give us direction. Having reviewed the recommendations of a number of proponents of interagency collaboration and talked with a variety of practitioners, we can offer here today's best thinking.

## Emerging Criteria for Integrated Services

Collaboration can be approached through

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(1) a professional coordinator (or case manager) within a school who might coordinate the services of several agencies and match them with the needs of children; (2) the services of various agencies at the school, selected for easy access and close coordination; or (3) consistent communication and joint projects that allow all educational, mental health, correctional, and other institutions to coordinate with each other. Whatever approach is taken, however, certain basic principles will apply. Inter-agency collaborations should be comprehensive, preventive, child-centered, and flexible.

**Comprehensive.** By "comprehensive," we mean that the set of agencies involved should—as a group—provide a wide spectrum of essential services and attempt to meet the most important needs of those most at risk. Rather than concentrate on the single-issue approaches that dominate city and county services now, involved agencies should seek ways to ensure that individual children and families actually receive a coherent program of assistance. Each program needs to take into account the functions of partner agencies and how they fit into an overall matrix. Different approaches to service and the potential for overlap must be considered.

**Accomplishing this won't be easy.** Long-standing habits and bureaucratic barriers will have to fall. Take the time to learn about other agencies—how they operate and how we can best connect with them. From the individual agency's point of view, there may be no tangible incentive to collaboration; and, in the end, we'll all have to give up some turf.

**Preventive.** Unfortunately, under the current system, services don't kick in until children are in critical condition. For example, we offer mental health services only for the most emotionally disturbed. Academically, students have to be failing before they are eligible for special help. By then, a student may get so far behind that his or her confidence is shot and ego destroyed.

A better way would be to create a system that can focus on prevention and accommodate an increasingly diverse group of students—in terms of background, culture, and ways of learning. The system must be able to monitor the progress and development of all children, providing special assistance when needed. In practice, this will probably mean a major overhaul in the regular school program; it may also mean that some person (or group) will need to take primary responsibility for each child: a teacher, social worker, or counselor. Student study teams might be one way to make this work.

We can also begin to shift resources from acute intervention programs into preventive approaches such as prenatal care, health care, day care, and preschool. These might not make a big difference right away; but as the Committee for Economic Development (1985) has pointed out, putting resources into children is an investment, not a cost.

**Child-centered.** When services are child-centered, the overall needs of the child are given priority over institutional or other concerns. Agencies cooperate to develop the best, most appropriate response; and success is measured by improvement of the child's condition. Single-issue programs slice the child any number of ways without taking a balanced, comprehensive, long-term

view of what will really make a difference. When individual programs provide their services in isolation, no one is responsible for checking the overall condition of the child and family. School staffs, Heath and McLaughlin assert, are "notoriously unaware of services available through juvenile justice, social service, or mental health agencies" (1989, p. 309). Even if they suspect a child's school failure is related to problems at home, they don't know where to turn for help.

Kirst and McLaughlin (1989) stress that children's services need to reflect the growing diversity of our child population—diversity not only of ethnicity, language, and culture, but also of needs. Drugs, crime, AIDS, and poverty have become so prevalent that our schools are facing challenges very different from those of 10, or even 5, years ago. Schools must respond with effective assistance.

To move from program-driven to child-centered services, we also need to improve our understanding of children's needs, monitor them over time, and take a broader contextual view of how to help. To do this, we need to come up with improved ways of collecting, maintaining, and sharing data on children. In some agencies, staff don't even know how many kids are receiving what kind of service. Gardner (1989) points out that no city in California really knows how much is being spent on youth services.

**Flexible.** To get away from the overlapping or conflicting programs we have now, we need to consider alternative ways of applying procedures, assigning staff responsibilities, and designing services—in other words, to build flexibility into services. At present, the services children receive are often predetermined by rigid sets of procedures and regulations. Screening, referral, and the type and length of treatment a child receives are all prescribed from the beginning. If a child is eligible for x program, he or she receives x service, no matter what; if eligible for y,

## Collaborating for the Future: *Beyond the Schools Report*

Part I of *Beyond the Schools: How Schools and Communities Must Collaborate to Solve the Problems Facing America's Youth*, a joint report from the National School Boards Association and the American Association of School Administrators, identifies the mounting economic and social problems facing our children and youth—problems that schools alone cannot adequately address. Part II of the 28-page booklet outlines 10

strategies that schools and society, working together, can implement to improve at-risk students' prospects for a successful future and America's chances for remaining "preeminent, economically and politically, in our increasingly interdependent world."

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then that service is provided. A religious adherence to guidelines can cause children to get fragmented, overlapping services.

To be effective, children's services need to break out of this mold and allow service providers to respond to the child. Children are complex and can't be divided up into pieces—pieces that don't necessarily add up to the whole.

The way kids are identified and treated can have long-lasting effects on the types of services they receive and, in a larger sense, who they become. Once a child is pigeonholed into a category (dropout, drug abuser, pregnant teen), his or her fate within the system is often sealed. Heath and McLaughlin (1989) even recommend involving children in their own diagnosis and treatment as a way of ensuring the best possible services. When we leave decision making entirely up to adults, important opportunities for helping children may be lost.

Staff roles can also be more flexible. Service providers sometimes may need to step outside the particular boundaries of their job descriptions to make sure that what needs doing gets done. For example, Schorr (1989) suggests ways that service can be continued when staff and clients develop close relationships. Agencies, too, must be able to continue or increase responsibilities from time to time.

Finally, we need to look at how ser-

vices operate. For example, we might allow staffers to step out of agency boundaries to provide services. They can go to community centers, schools, and even homes to ensure that clients receive close attention. Agencies can also arrange, when necessary, for staff to devote more than the usual amount of time to the children and families they serve. Programs can be set up to draw on a variety of resources and other services, instead of maintaining the narrow-focus approach often found today.

### How to Develop Collaboration Among Agencies

Next we offer a step-by-step guide toward streamlining interagency collaboration. The five steps outlined are by no means comprehensive or complete; they are meant to be general guideposts.

#### Step 1: Map the Territory

The first step toward building collaboration is finding out who the potential (and probable) partners might be. Make an inventory of all the social service agencies that currently interact with the school. For each, list overall purpose, services provided, functions served, and the name and number of a contact person.

Next, try to identify other agencies in the community that aren't currently involved with the schools. Check with the city and county governments for leads.

Be sure to include private programs. The famous semantacist Korzybski cautioned that we shouldn't mistake the map for the territory; the picture of social services you have now might not accurately reflect what's really there.

As a final step in mapping the territory, you'll need to figure out which people from the local schools and other agencies you can count on to be the main players in a collaboration effort. Who can work with you and assume some of the responsibilities connected with developing the plan and getting it under way? Whom can you rely on to stay with it? Find these people, and get them on board.

#### Step 2: Survey the Field

The information we've provided in this brief report only scratches the surface of existing models and strategies. Before you start to make up your own plan, you need to find out what others are doing to improve interagency collaboration. A good place to start is with the references listed here. Next, follow up on your own leads. You've probably already heard of a community or school near you that has begun to explore alternatives for coordinating children's services. Contact them to find out what they've done and whether they have any materials to share. If they sound as if they're succeeding, arrange a visit.

If you're the interagency pioneer in your area and aren't aware of any other efforts nearby, try to find a state or regional network that can point you in the right direction. County agencies and the state department of education are potential resources. The main idea in this phase is simply to learn as much about improving interagency collaboration as you can. Do your homework.

#### Step 3: Review Current Needs and Services

Once you have an idea of who the players are, it's important to assess the current services for students. What are the most critical needs of students? Are they being met? Does the system have



Richard Kohnen

agreed-upon criteria for who's "at risk"? While individual programs may be available for students having a wide variety of needs, the formal identification, diagnosis, and referral system may focus on only a few symptoms.

Estimate the level of coordination among programs and services. Is there any kind of case management system that will enable someone to have an overview of the number and types of services individual students are receiving?

One way to approach the review is to develop a matrix that matches up needs (academic assistance, personal counseling, substance abuse, employment, health) with various service providers. This should help reveal gaps in service and areas of overlap. Potential roadblocks to coordination (such as regulations or budget requirements) might surface as well.

#### **Step 4: Develop a Plan**

A project is only as good as the plan it's based on. No matter how urgent the need to collaborate, taking time for careful planning will pay off in the long run. Pull together a core team of people you feel will devote the time and energy necessary to develop a plan and put it into action. Here are some essential elements of a good plan:

- **Agree on a common vision.** Try to capture your team's shared vision of interagency collaboration. Think about how you would like to see children's services provided. How would agencies and their representatives interact? How would children be identified and served? You might start with the principles outlined above. Are these part of your vision? How could services be made comprehensive, preventive, child-centered, and flexible? Bear in mind that other agencies may bring different

*From exploring the territory, surveying the field, and evaluating needs and services to creating and launching the plan, cautious planning and thoughtful involvement of people are essential for a successful interagency effort.*

perspectives and concerns. These should be expressed early in the course of collaboration to avoid problems with communication later on. Try to keep everyone focused on what is best for children.

- **Set goals and expectations.** Your goals and expectations should operationalize the vision. First, conduct a thorough needs assessment for children and youth in the community. Don't just rely on what planning committee members know—look carefully at the data schools and agencies have collected. Then, to complete the picture, interview or survey administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Next, project the

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outcomes you can reasonably expect for children, the changes you foresee in how agencies work, and how you'd like interactions among agencies to be. As you work through the planning phase, you will probably want to modify your expectations and refine them. Throughout, the primary focus will likely be on the partner agencies and how they work together to improve the services for children and youth. Keep in mind, however, that each organization will have its own set of needs, priorities, and goals.

Some important goals will reach beyond the agencies involved. For example, the team might want to explore ways to tap outside resources, both public and private. In this case, someone will need to assume the task of monitoring new legislation. Exerting influence on policymakers for future funding might be another goal. For this, you might want to share lessons learned from the collaborative process.

•*Design a comprehensive set of services.* A critical part of the plan will be coming up with the right set of services to meet your needs. Many of these will already be in place; some may need to be enhanced or upgraded; others will have to be created from scratch. Pull out the matrix developed in Step 3; then, using the other background information you've gathered, begin to design a set of services that is not only comprehensive, but preventive, flexible, and child-centered.

•*Define the roles for each agency.* A fourth element of planning is to clarify the role that each agency and its representatives will play in the collaborative process. This applies not only to the planning and development stage, but also to the actual integration of services. In planning, try to share assignments fairly; don't let one person shoulder all the responsibility. Build a spirit of collaboration.

Institutional philosophies, imperatives, and expectations must be clearly laid out and communicated, because each agency operates under certain constraints that will affect its participation

in the collaborative. Mental health service agencies, for example, are restricted by law from disclosing information about their clients, even though information about parents of at-risk youth may very well be crucial for other agencies as they develop a program for the child. Keep in mind that the heavy caseloads of some agencies may force them to focus only on the most serious cases (Zellman 1990).

•*Chart the action steps.* Formulate steps that the planning committee or task force will follow in order to improve interagency collaboration. It's a good idea to develop a flowchart or timeline that shows what will be done, who will do it, and when it's expected. Make sure the flowchart is jointly developed and agreed upon by all involved agencies. Later, the chart can serve as a guide and a check to make sure each agency is holding up its end and events are on schedule. You might want to include how you will ensure information-sharing and day-to-day communication.

•*Plan an evaluation.* In these times of belt-tightening budgets, accountability takes on added importance. Unfortunately, many people don't think of evaluating their program until after it is well under way and it's too late to gather the necessary data. A good evaluation re-

quires careful planning, and a place to start is the *Evaluator's Handbook* (Herman et al. 1987). Whether you conduct the evaluation yourself or get outside assistance, make sure you're asking both summative (outcome) and formative (project improvement) questions. To get useful answers, you'll need to go beyond the traditional bean-counting of numbers of children served or contact hours. How effective was the collaborative? Is communication improved? Have some of the bureaucratic barriers fallen? Are services for children more effective and timely? How can interagency collaboration be improved? What can increase efficiency and effectiveness? Decide beforehand which data you're going to need to answer your outcomes questions; it'll be much harder to collect it after the fact.

### Step 5: Get Started

The main rule for getting started is to start small. Don't expect to have everyone involved in joint projects right away. You are dealing with entrenched habits and practices, so begin with clearly manageable tasks. Schedule monthly or biweekly meetings. Covering the first two phases (map the territory and survey the field) should help the agencies involved learn about each other and establish ties. As you reach the planning phase, think in terms of pilot projects, rather than massive change efforts. You might want to begin with a targeted staff development project designed to build consensus and open up new roles and responsibilities for people.

### Pitfalls and Danger Signs

As you embark on an interagency effort, there are at least four pitfalls you should look out for. While they may seem obvious, they have been the undoing of many well-intentioned groups.

• *NATO (No Action, Talk Only).* Interagency collaboration meetings can easily collapse into gripe sessions with little actual follow-up or resolution with client's

needs and problems. We call this "NATO." Without the likelihood of tangible results, NATO can be demoralizing to all involved. Social service personnel have busy schedules and are often overcommitted. They cannot afford to take time out that's not well spent; unless participants see some potential payoff from the beginning, they'll soon drop out.

*Creating an interagency czar or a superagency.* Another pitfall to avoid is the establishment of yet a new layer of bureaucracy. As Gardner (1989) has pointed out, many cities, districts, counties, and states have learned very quickly to "play the coordination game". They pay lip service to the new social concern and appear to be coordinating without actually helping kids. Kirst and McLaughlin (1989) also argue against additional bureaucracy. In these days of an astronomical budget deficit and dwindling state, county, and local funds, money is best spent on direct, front-line services.

*Information doesn't equal Knowledge doesn't equal Action.* In today's world of advanced information technology, we are all too often information-rich but knowledge-poor. Information does not automatically become knowledge. Emotional readiness and active mental work are required before facts and data can be absorbed, digested, and turned into personal knowledge. As you gather information about other agencies and what they do, keep in mind that this inventory is only a beginning.

A number of organizations have sponsored successful conferences, pulling together parents, teachers, administrators, and public and private community agency personnel to exchange information about their various concerns, needs, and services. Unfortunately, the sponsoring agency often considers its mission accomplished when the participants head home; plans begin for the next annual conference. We need to take the time, collaboratively, to figure out what we've learned.

Action, or follow-up, is the third part

of the equation. The distance between knowledge and action is great; even when we have the necessary knowledge to accomplish a task, it takes still more hard work and motivational force to act effectively on what we know.

*An excess of jargon.* If you've ever attended a meeting where different agencies were represented, you may have encountered a parade of acronyms, such as DPSS, CWA, WIG, SARB, SART, SAR, LEP, NEP, or professional jargon such as Chapter 1 or Chapter 2 programs, 601 or 602 schools.

To avoid this *jargon-naut*, we must take care to speak plainly and clearly, in the spirit of true collaboration, without taking refuge in the opaque security of our own bureaucratized. However familiar our own acronyms may be to us, they're probably meaningless to those from other agencies.

### Collaborative Efforts for Lasting Success

As educators, we know that schools can no longer afford to go it alone. The same is true for social service agencies. Collaborative efforts between schools and other community sectors require careful attention to the proper conditions for safeguarding and bettering the child's education and welfare and to the relationships between school and non-school personnel. Instant collaboration may bring instant gratification, but it is not likely to bring lasting success. Instead, careful planning, combined with thoughtful involvement of people and places, is essential for the kind of school-community collaboration that leads to improved well-being for all children and youth at risk.

The Students At Risk Program at Far West Laboratory is gathering information on promising approaches to interagency collaboration. Future work will include documentation of these experiments, dissemination, and technical assistance to schools, districts, and states.

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**Grace Pung Guthrie** is Project Director, Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, and **Larry F. Guthrie** is Director, Students At Risk Program, Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 730 Harrison St., San Francisco, CA 94107-1242.

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